

Alexandria Archaeological Commission Statement
Waterfront Planning Goals
Presented at Waterfront Public Forum
April 23, 2009

We know that human beings have been living, working, and traveling along the Alexandria waterfront for at least the last 13,000 years. It was during this time that a Native American left a fragment of a spear point he was making on land overlooking the Potomac River. The maker of this artifact, which is called a Clovis Point by archaeologists, probably came to hunt and fish in the marshy areas around Hunting Creek that were then part of the Potomac River system. Countless other people and activities were drawn to the river in the centuries that followed. It's a long and exciting history. Many tourists and residents would be fascinated to learn more. Helping them to do so must be part of waterfront planning.

The Alexandria Archaeological Commission endorses the set of principles set forth by several historic commissions and groups in 2007 (Preservation Perspective on Alexandria Waterfront Planning). These principles relate to nine topics: Preservation Planning, Resource Inventory, Research and GIS, Historic Interpretive Planning, Protection Measures, Historic Landscapes, Corridors and Arteries, Historic Commerce, Flood Levels, and Living History. Tonight, we would like to elaborate on some of the core elements we believe are needed to ensure that the waterfront's historic character is enhanced authentically, that historic resources are protected and reused in dynamic ways, that people will learn about what happened here in an interesting fashion, and that sustainable practices are used.

Since the 1970s, mounting evidence has shown that historic preservation is a powerful community and economic revitalization strategy. Evidence includes statistics compiled by cities on the economic and social benefits of historic preservation. Protection of these resources provides tangible connections to the people and events that have shaped our communities and our collective histories. Preserving the physical reminders of our past creates a sense of place and community pride. Reported findings include:

- Creation of local historic districts stabilizes, and often increases, residential and commercial property values.
- Increases in property values in historic districts are typically greater than increases in the community at large.
- Historic building rehabilitation, which is more labor intensive and requires greater specialization and higher skills levels, creates more jobs and results in more local business than does new construction.
- Heritage tourism provides substantial economic benefits. Tourists drawn by a community's (or region's) historic character typically stay longer and spend more during their visit than other tourists.

- Historic rehabilitation encourages additional neighborhood investment and produces a high return for municipal dollars spent.
- Use of a city's or town's existing historic building stock can support growth-management policies by increasing the availability of centrally located housing.
- Conservation and adaptive reuse of buildings can provide environmental benefits.

The protection of historic resources helps revitalize and redevelop older areas around Old Town. As important, it allows for a more diverse and wider interpretation of history that will continue to attract more tourists.

The members of the Archaeological Commission believe that preserving the physical remnants of our long history is essential to any plan to improve our waterfront. We need to plan for better preservation of the authentic, very old, and not quite so old buildings and historic places, as well as archaeological resources. They are the true foundation of the “historic ambience” that surveys tell us visitors to Alexandria value. At the present time a stranger to Alexandria walking along our waterfront might not even recognize it as an historic area, much less part of one of the first historic districts placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Some of the oldest buildings are either unoccupied or underused. These are the buildings that once housed Interarms and Olsson's Books & Records store on South Union Street, Potomac Arms at 0 Prince Street, and the historic Corn Exchange at the corner of King and South Union streets. In their present state, they are endangered buildings. Any waterfront plan should include a plan to save these buildings and to provide interpretation for each one (as well as other historic buildings), possibly in the form of an interesting plaque on the exterior or in the sidewalk that would mention an important moment or person or use connected to the site.

An important objective of waterfront planning should be the adaptive reuse of these old buildings. It is the right thing to do on every level. The architects of these structures were designing for a world that operated on less energy than we do today. We would do well to reuse their buildings, since rehabilitation is one of the most sustainable development methods.

The entire waterfront is within the Old and Historic District and subject to the height limits and other restrictions that apply to the district. The two Robinson Terminal buildings, the sites on either end of the original bay around which Alexandria was developed (before the bay between them was filled in) are the sites most likely to be redeveloped. These two sites have great historic significance and are probably the most historic on the waterfront since the town grew from these commercial and shipbuilding points. That has to be taken into account if redevelopment occurs. Whatever is built in the future must reinforce the historic importance of these places—through design, open space, themes, art, and décor--and blend in with the historic buildings nearby.

Other elements noted in the 2007 historic-preservation principles relate to the importance of conducting good research and archaeological preservation:

- Archaeological investigations, particularly at the two Robinson Terminal locations, to preserve any archaeological resources that are still present and would enhance public knowledge and appreciation of the past at Oronoco Park.

- Waterfront properties and structures research. Photographs, maps, deeds, and other court documents should be researched and synthesized
- Complete overlay maps that would show the evolution of the waterfront and its different uses over time
- Comparative studies of other historic-waterfront cities
- An inventory of all historic and current organizations that engage in water-related activities.

This research should lead to web-based information and written materials for the public as well as other historic interpretation: signs, activities, education and tours. But first, relevant materials need to be gathered. Using them, we can show the way the waterfront changed over time.

We need to lay out the basic themes of the waterfront as the commercial heart of the city even in colonial times and as a logistical center for military campaigns from the French and Indian War up until World War II, when the Torpedo Factory was really making torpedoes. Between those two wars, Alexandria was invaded from the river twice – in 1814 and 1861. To tell these stories, we must look on preservation as an interpretive whole. It can never be about saving just one building or lot, even though those are important.

There are specific measures we can take:

- We can encourage the granting of easements through promotion and seminars.
- We can save existing buildings, particularly the empty or underused, through adaptive reuse.
- We can encourage owners to protect their historic interiors wherever possible. For example, some old waterfront warehouses may contain antique elevators, which should not be torn out.
- We need to save historic advertising where it still exists painted on buildings and draw attention to it for the historic information it provides.
- When buildings are under serious threat of loss or can boost the vitality and connectivity of the waterfront, the City should consider purchasing them for adaptive reuse. One important attraction the city lacks is a ground-floor, easily accessible archaeology museum. Locating such a museum in a historic building would be ideal.
- We need to support organizations engaged in water-related activities.

If at the end of this process the city adopts a plan for waterfront improvements, any replacement of hardscape should be done with historically correct materials such as brick and stone.

Finally, it's interesting to note the truism that every old is new again. In recent years many city planners have worked under the guidance of the "new urbanism," which emphasizes connectivity and walkability as important design principles. Alexandria's founders who laid out the waterfront's streets and alleys in colonial times understood urbanism very well. Their grid of north-south and east-west streets and alleys served the port and the movement of people and goods very well. We should reclaim the alleys that have been closed off or used as parking lots. That will improve connectivity and increase the vista of the river from Union Street. Union Street itself should beckon people to stroll along it. People then will be drawn north and south

from King Street. The Strand should be visible again and be used as it once was as a waterfront-access road from Oronoco to Wolfe streets. All the east-west streets should lead to a waterfront that is walkable for its entire length.

We are hopeful that historic preservation and interpretation will be a guiding principle for our new waterfront plan and that the historic resources, historic character, and real history will be the foundation of the planning process. We do not believe it can succeed without these.